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SOMEBODY WHO FAILS CAN ACTUALLY BE BETTER THAN OTHERS

Sonam Wangchuk,
Educational innovator tells it
in an exclusive conversation
with BW Education's Dr
Waqar Ahmed Fahad

From schools to colleges, polytechnics to universities, we usually assume that education can only be obtained from formal system, no matter how much skewed our pedagogical structures are but we are bound to believe that nature cannot nurture the individual growth of an individual. However my perception was challenged when I met scientist & innovator, Sonam Wangchuk who defied the idea of formal schools to be the only place of learning & created his own creative schools to produce genius. With an aplomb and poise in his attitude, this education reformist has myriad innovations in his name.

Q: What is your take on the current structure "one size fits all" method of education that a majority of our institutions follow? How can a change be brought about?

A: I think education cannot be "one size fits all" be



cause people are different, no two people are similar and their ways of learning are different and their lives in future will be different so it has to be more flexible than what we have. What we have today is more like industrial schools, all mechanically organised into boxes then you put the products into different boxes and put a blanket solution to all. Children can be so different and they are good at very different things, some are very good at intellectual things others are very good at physical things and both are important in our lives. As they say you cannot judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree so you can't tell someone you're a failure just because you are judging them on things that are not their strength and therefore it needs to be more flexible. I understand that we are dealing with a large population and therefore we will not be able to be as Gurukuls used to be but still even in the current system

we lay all our stress on science and maths as if nothing else was important. In that I think, for example, the National Open School has many choices and you can feel successful in any of the fields. I think it needs to be spread like that and beyond that so people can feel successful in the field that they are good at and not feel like failures in fields that they do not care about and they are not good at by just raising some like science and maths to a pedestal to no real reason.

Q: India, our country and even our educational institutions are lagging behind their global counterparts in promoting the two most important elements of progress and excellence. How can one influence the change of thought, and make innovation and invention mainstream?

A: Well for Innovation to prosper, people need to feel at

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ease with them. And in India, I see one thing lacking is that we don't feel confident about ourselves. We are always looking up to models (of) the west and east and are never confident about ourselves and therefore we make our children look at others and never do things that they are good at, think of things that they can think and that's a very sad situation because innovation requires you to think out of the box. Differently, And you can't think differently if you're always told to think in a certain way, and do things in a certain way – like neighbours children, like (that) role model and so on. Children should get that freedom to be a little mad and a little eccentric and do something unexpected and that's when innovation thrives and therefore I think it's not so much about schools and children, it's about our society. We have been (sort of) enslaved for too long, we have been colonies for hundreds of years. If I had my way, I feel that this country should have had a ministry of decolonisation when it got independent to decolonise our minds and to make it natural free flowing minds that are not always looking for approval from here and there and this side and that side. Letting children be will foster innovation. Children by natures design have a lot of inquisitiveness, curiosity which are basics for innovation to happen and what we do is we just kill that and then make them into cubes and spheres to handle as if they were products. They are organic beings with all kinds of thought and ideas. These should be allowed to flow freely. If they like playing with wood, maybe they're good to become a carpenter, let them be, let them do that. Instead, our society looks down at something like carpentry and looks up at something like Engineering and thereby what we end up doing is - a person who was gifted and carved to become the best carpenter in the world is made to become an engineer, a poor engineer, and then somebody else who was perhaps never meant to become a carpenter is made to take his place and you get a bad carpenter and a bad engineer and then we expect innovation. We'll have to allow children to do what they feel passionate about and a lot needs to be changed in the home like when they are inquisitive we consider that as a problem. I think we should be worried if they are not inquisitive and we need fuel questioning and fuel discovering and so on which doesn't seem to be happening so all I am saying is that it needs to happen as much in the society as in school and if society, if people understand these things then they will demand it from the government and then proper policies will be made. In a condition like now when we expect everything from school, things won't change.



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Q: Knowledge creation is more significant than knowledge dissemination. What is your opinion?

A: I am saying for a country like India we need to create and help children create their own knowledge and take ownership of it and that happens when they do their own experiments and they do their own discoveries rather than just basing everything from reading from somebody else's writing, and making some standard answer. Reproduction of that as a success of education - that's one of the saddest things in our system. All our exams are based on reproducing standardized things and where you can't have any creativity, any flexibility you can't have an innovation. It will be somebody else's knowledge disseminated through transacted, adminis-

tered, doctored but it won't be your own experiential learning so that's what we need to do in this country to let people create their own discoveries and take ownership of their own learning.

Q: How do you ensure that the misfits and failures in the present education system are successful through your institution?

A: First of all, I wouldn't call them failures maybe. You have to look at our school system. You have a system which is totally not as nature wants young people to learn. You have schools that trap you in a dark, dingy classroom for 8 hours which is not our nature. Grown-ups even, leave aside children. They are outgoing and

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cannot be held in a room. Put them in a room and then lecture them all day, make them scribble things and reproduce those and call that education. So, in a system like this, I think in a system that is at fault, somebody who fails maybe actually better than others as the system itself is so much at fault that I would consider those who are not doing well to be more normal than those who are doing very well in a system like this. You have to think of this, what I think is that like all young ones of any species of animals, human young ones by nature are designed to learn by doing things out in nature in wild nature amidst dangers even. And we have never learnt like this ever. As hunter-gatherers our children were always out in wild nature tackling dangers together with the grownups and learning. As settled farmers, our children were again for the last 10000 years they were with the adults, in the field doing things and learning. It's only in the last 300 years called Industrial Revolution that we have put them in these factories and then made them to do uniform things and everything in the world is all on the touch of a button. They really don't use any of this nature's gifts that every young person is gifted with a lot of playfulness. Not only humans' even puppies and kittens. You'll see how playful they are. Playfulness is not a joke it's very serious it's the very software I think that Nature packs with you in the box for you to learn continually so play so playfulness is the software of learning it's only recently that some of us seem to discover that Play Way method is a good method. Kittens and Puppies are trained by themselves. We humans make our children memorize everything which is not good. We have to bring a lot of

changes in these things.

Q: A question that troubles most students and parents, what builds a successful future-Engineering, MBA or both?

A: : Well I would say neither. What in my opinion is success is a happy person and a happy person can be with or without Engineering or MBA. A very unhappy person with the best of MBA, best of Engineering is I don't think you would call them a success. Someone who is depressed wants to jump off a cliff with top scores in MBA is hardly a success and therefore I would rather say that in our country we are somewhat obsessed with achievements of this kind- degrees, marks, ranks and then once you're finished education your turnover becomes your ranking and I think this is an unfortunate copying of the West. The West is I feel at a very primitive stage of making life into a journey of fulfilling desires. I think India had advanced way beyond you have Vedas you have Yoga you have Vipasana in India that go way beyond that kind of system. I know I particularly remember and respect a quote from Buddha as against the system where it's all a race to fulfil your desires. Buddha said for a human being it's a greater achievement to conquer one single desire than to fulfil a thousand desires. That is what I would call success when you are able to conquer your desires and you can be happy with hardly anything that's a successful person in my views rather than somebody who has fulfilled 999 but is dying and yearning and for the thousandth and then it doesn't end there. So we have become like a bottomless pack-

ets you put in that bucket anything you put your computer is your mobile your car's it doesn't fill because the bottom isn't there. What Buddha said was basically put a bottom to your bucket and the few things you have will fill it and you will be contented so contentment is more a success for me and therefore I feel today we see all these people talking about Start-ups and ventures and Entrepreneurships great that good should start new things, innovation is great entrepreneurship is great but I don't like this thing of you have to become a multi billionaire, multinational. You shouldn't, you needn't. You could just be a small entrepreneur in





your own village but happy and that's beautiful. This is what will make this planet a beautiful peaceful planet and this thing of going multinational and multi-billion is what has caused the planet to almost die. All the climate change, global warming, our glaciers are melting, our sea level is rising it's all thanks to this multi-billion multinational desire satisfying trend that we are following and we should actually lead the way to the West rather than follow their unsuccessful ways.

Q: As a reformatory visionary, you have carved a fruitful path for education and entrepreneurship. Do you think you've been able to realise your vision completely? How successful would you say you've been in transforming your dream project

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have had schools where children are beaten badly, punished insultingly, broken down and you never rise out of that kind of situation in your life so compared to that I feel happy that we have come a long way but compared to what they deserve, we are a long way away again.

Sonam Wangchuk is a Ladakhi engineer, innovator and education reformist.

into a reality?

A: Well I think I am far away from realizing what is not only my dream but what children, students deserve I would say but at the same time I am happy to say that I see myself and our work far away from how it used to be, where it was much worse and children were treated sort of in ways that you don't treat children or even prisoners of war. We